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Qu'est-ce que faire école ? Regards sur « l'école de Paris »

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« L'École de Paris » : un regard éloigné...et personnel

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The "School of Paris" – A Personal View from Outside

« L'École de Paris » : un regard éloigné...et personnel

Hans-Joachim Gehrke

- 1 The following contribution is written in a very personal manner, from an autobiographical perspective. One could even – in an allusion to Nietzsche's "Was ich von den Alten lernte"¹ – give it the title "What I learned from the School of Paris". Indeed, looking back to my intellectual formation and my scholarly training, I can clearly detect the impact the ideas, concepts, insights coming from Paris had on my own thinking. And, although we all are aware of the illusions and failures caused by our autobiographical memory, I would like to insist that it can contribute to giving our life, and especially its intellectual development, a certain coherence – albeit *ex post* – and to transforming, according to Paul Ricœur, an irrational contingency into an intelligible one by means of narrative.
- 2 Given this personal approach to the topic, my contribution is characterized by two peculiarities. Firstly, since I did not have the opportunity to study in Paris, I was never directly influenced by the great teachers of the school and I became familiar with its concepts, views, and methods – if at all – but indirectly, or relatively late, due to contact and collaboration with colleagues and friends who can now be regarded representatives of this school. I am therefore writing from an outside perspective. Secondly, I recognized the Paris school, initially and primarily, as being part of what I understood and understand as a characteristic French tradition. Thus, in what follows, I am going to look also at the intellectual world, the conceptual environment in general, which was important in shaping the school.
- 3 Combining these two characteristics, a personal point of view as well as a general approach, I can take a remark by Oswyn Murray as my starting point. Referring to Bertrand Russell's evaluation of experiments with monkeys by American and German scientists, he noticed "the national response to the phenomena" and connected it to the experience of "anyone who has studied attempts to characterize the Greek *polis*. To the German the *polis* can only be described in a handbook of constitutional law; the

French *polis* is a form of Holy Communion; the English *polis* is a historical accident; while the American *polis* combines the practices of a Mafia convention with the principles of justice and individual freedom".²

- 4 Accordingly, as a student, I grew up with the focus on the constitutional aspects of the Greek city-state (and the Roman Republic and Principate even more so) – although my most prominent masters laboured hard to free themselves, and others, from this juridical bias and to overcome the rigid legal interpretations which German scholarship had inherited from Theodor Mommsen. My teacher Alfred Heuß and his successor, Jochen Bleicken, put special emphasis on criticising Mommsen's views, in general and in detail, and on giving social rules and political interests their due place in the study of ancient communities. Nevertheless, due to my early formation, from high school onwards, the state and its order prevailed, interests in political (and intellectual) history dominated the beginning of my studies.
- 5 So it came as a shock when, during my second academic year – in 1968, *nota bene* – acting as a member of a history students council at Göttingen university, I was told by my fellow students that I was absolutely wrong; that diplomatic and political history was nothing more than bullshit; that I had to focus on economic history, on microhistory, on the history of the suppressed, the common people, the poor. And for this new and progressive orientation in studying history, I was referred to the school of "Annales". In those days, to many students, the Annales-school symbolized, not only in Göttingen, a fresh, modern and leftist approach to history. It largely conformed with my own viewpoints and orientations. I was unaware of the fact that this interpretation of "Annales" was something of an oversimplification, but I took seriously all the advice granted me by my fellow students. Worried about becoming a conservative, backward-looking scholar, I was eager to become a modern, progressive, future-orientated historian. So, economic history in accordance with the school of the "Annales" was the need of the moment!
- 6 There were, however, two problems I had to cope with. My mastery of the French language was far from sufficient; but I have since then been diligently attempting to improve it. Secondly, and even worse, I found economic history truly boring – but only in the beginning, for (as often happens) by delving deeper and deeper into the subject, I was increasingly fascinated by it, particularly when approaching it from an anthropological viewpoint. And, although that had a lot to do with the conceptions of the "Annales", it led me more to Max Weber, Karl Polanyi, and Moses Finley than to the School of Paris.
- 7 But there was a second, and even more important, experience during the early years of my studies. One could call it learning outside the classroom and the auditory. It took place in the student's pubs of Göttingen, especially at "Frau Ilse's", not all day long, but during the night, in late evening and early morning hours, accompanied by glasses of beer – a true German *symposion*. We were sitting, drinking, reasoning, discussing, even arguing (and increasingly lively, in accordance with the amount of beer consumed). The main subjects of our discussions were of course (I speak of 1968 and 1969) Hegel and Marx, Marcuse and Habermas. But since some of my friends were studying French Language and Literature, structuralism was on the agenda too, Ferdinand de Saussure and especially Claude Lévi-Strauss. My fellow students made very clear that they could take nobody seriously who was not familiar with (French) structuralism and its way of thinking. So I learned my lesson, more and more by reading some of the key texts. The

idea to go to Paris and to come into direct contact with the big names and their followers arose. For several reasons, however, I was not able to do so. Otherwise, I would have become much more acquainted with the School of Paris, and I could present a more thorough and specific paper than this one.

- 8 On the other hand, even this indirect influence had a noticeable impact on my formation. And I am sure that I am not speaking about an isolated case. It was particularly during the late Sixties and the early Seventies, when German students and other intellectuals and scholars started gazing abroad in the aftermath of the Nazi disaster and the retrogressive age of the Fifties. And as regularly was the case with German intellectuals and artists, their gaze fell on France, reasonably enough. And although I had not made the experience of living there for a longer period, I can imagine that our vivid debates were not very far away from what was being discussed by students in Paris (and in other places too, of course). In addition to the studies in my own field, the impressions I received during these years and in these contexts, and with them the aforementioned influences from France and Paris, became an integral part of my intellectual life.
- 9 From this time onwards, in working on new projects and in opening new fields of research for myself, I was always aware of methods and approaches common in France. I was continuously monitoring, so to speak, what was going on in Paris. And as time went by, I increasingly came into personal contact with French scholars, amongst them representatives of the Paris school, thanks to shared interests and projects. What began as a view from the outside has, more and more, led to collegial collaboration and personal contact, often to ties of friendship. With all this, I learned more about 'our' School, its various facets and modes of thinking. On the other hand, from my viewpoint, its concepts and theories always remained embedded in ideas and methods of what I consider as a more general approach in anthropology, especially as it was developed in France.
- 10 Within this vast area of thinking, there are two perceptions that have had a special impact on my own scholarly work, encouraging me to ask better questions and to glean a deeper understanding of the respective phenomena. During the Eighties, while working on my thesis of Habilitation on civil wars in Greece³, and looking for explanation for these radical social and political conflicts, I strove to take a closer look at the economy of Greece. Being aware of the role of agriculture, I started studying the Greek countryside and dealing with the different modes of using it. Thus historical geography and landscape archaeology came into play, and predecessors came into my sights. These were, naturally enough, prominent names such as Alexander von Humboldt's and Carl Ritter's. They deal with the relations between space and human beings, in the sense of the classical "Anthropogeographie". This, however, always had a tendency to natural determinism.
- 11 It was particularly the ideas of Lucien Febvre, one of the founding fathers of the "Annales" school, which prevented me from falling into this trap. Especially from his works on history and geography I learned how to avoid any deterministic interpretation, and to be aware of the interdependencies and reciprocities between natural phenomena of space and land and human dealing with them and shaping them. This kind of anthropo-geography or, to use a better term, geo-anthropology seems to me to be the most adequate way of evaluating the interplay between the different factors that come together in highly complex ways in human geography. At the least, it

helped me enormously in interpreting the empirical data I had gathered during my source reading and fieldwork.

- 12 In addition, I became more and more interested in historical anthropology in general, and in the work of Louis Gernet and his followers especially. Accordingly, I entered the intellectual milieu of the Paris school. At this point especially, I need to refer back to the quote by Oswyn Murray at the beginning: having begun by taking a look not only at the Greek *polis*, but at Greek civilisation in general, from a constitutional, political, and social perspective, I now detected the immense importance of religion as an anthropological phenomenon. I began to conceive religion not only as a sector, as merely a part or special area of history and its study, in the sense of "history of religions", but as a key to a better understanding of ancient societies – and not only those.
- 13 I owe an eminent scholar, Henk Versnel, very important insights into the character of Greek religion. But I have by now learned more and more about its role in shaping collective ideas, establishing institutions, forming communities, as a constitutive force within the life of human beings, individually and collectively. Here I have to refer to the work of Jean-Pierre Vernant which I have been studying for a long time, and I am still very grateful to my friend Alain Schnapp who gave me the "Opus Seuil" edition of his "Œuvres" as a present about ten years ago. They have been, up to now, my constant companions. All the facets which had formed an image in my mind of French modes of thinking converged in the figure of this thinker and teacher.
- 14 What had become characteristic for my own procedures was to be found here too: reference to general questions and to theoretical frameworks instead of positivistic research and naive interpretation of sources. And it was characterized by the antithetic approach of structuralism, at least as I understood it. Above all, Vernant's ideas of myth and mythology seem to me to be the ideal way, the "Königsweg," to the adequate understanding of Greek religious and intellectual life, and thus to Greek culture in general. I learned to fully understand his remark, apparently trivial, though only at first glance: "La mythologie constitue, pour la pensée religieuse des Grecs, un des modes d'expression essentiels,"⁴ and I learned that this principle idea can lead even further.
- 15 My first serious attempt in the field of religious studies, an article on the Dea Syria, was still a sort of preparatory study. But my current work in analysing and evaluating the very first results of a geoarchaeological and historical-archaeological survey in the area surrounding Olympia⁵ was decisively stimulated by this approach: In re-reading the ancient sources and referring them to the evidence shown by the survey, I came to understand the traditions and *lieux de mémoire* of this small region as indicating to a true and specifically holy landscape, and – what struck me even more – I suddenly observed that this impact of religious feeling did not only shape the ancients' perception of the landscape. It was also a constitutive element for the formation of communities, which are classified only vaguely by terms such as *polis*, *ethnos*, or federal state. I am sure that these ideas and interpretations (I hesitate to speak of insights) would not have come to my mind without what I learned from the Paris school.
- 16 However – I have to point this out again – it is in my eyes the Paris school as embedded in its French, and I would like to add, European context. And at this point, I have to refer to Maurice Merleau-Ponty. During a brutal war, which separated Nazi Germany from the civilized world, this great philosopher and psychologist continued studying

the work of Edmund Husserl, bound to oblivion in his home country, and he became familiar even with the unpublished manuscripts smuggled to Leuven in 1939. Merleau-Ponty based his "Phénoménologie de la perception"⁶ mainly on his own expertise in psychology and psychiatry and on his careful studying of Husserl and his "Spätwerk". I must confess that I became familiar with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy only some years ago when I was researching concepts of space which might be helpful in historical geography. But now, in interpreting highly differing pieces of evidence concerning Olympia and Pisa, the anthropological-religious point of view and basic ideas on *espace vécu*, conceived and perceived space, converged; the Paris school and phenomenology merged; Jean-Pierre Vernant and Maurice Merleau-Ponty met – and all that, in my view, not by chance, but with a certain intellectual logic. What "French" meant to me, and what had special impact on my own thinking: here it came together.

- 17 These remarks may seem odd. To me, at least, they do: influences from here and there, from France and Paris, in addition and together with others, in part differing ones, without any order, neither chronologically, nor logically. It appears more chaos than coherence, and the reader may have got that impression throughout these few pages. However, is such a here and there, to and fro not characteristic of an intellectual biography? At least, if one is honest and does not attempt to give more *ex post* coherence to an incoherent set of events, as usually happens in (auto)biographical writing.
- 18 Of course, in choosing this personal way in dealing with the Paris school, I have also attempted, as I mentioned in the beginning, to make sense of both planned and, to a certain degree, confused, spontaneous, coincidental readings, studies, and contacts – but not too much. It was also my aim to leave some room for the accidental and the unintentional. We have to concede – and what we have learned about the working of our brains during the last years may illustrate this – that even our intellectual life is not a product of reason and logic. So my ideas on the Paris school and its impact on my scholarly work should be seen as a preliminary statement, given for the time being and regarding a complex process that is on-going. Twenty years ago, I would have painted a different picture. But for the moment, and in a retrospective view, I can state that for some of my ideas (I do not dare call them insights) I depend on various influences coming from France and Paris, and I hope I have been able to make clear in which respect, on which fields, and in which ways. It is particularly my current work which made me aware of these influences. Insofar, when I was asked to contribute to this volume, it was a *kairos*. So in conclusion I would like to express my gratitude to the editors for having been invited to contribute to this special number of *Cahiers "Mondes Anciens"*.

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NOTES

1. Nietzsche 1969.
2. Murray 1990, p. 2-3.
3. By comparing my book on *stasis* (Gehrke 1985) to that of Nicole Loraux (2005), one may become aware (already through the respective titles) of the original differences between our approaches. But if one takes into consideration my later work on the topic (for instance Gehrke 1987; Gehrke 2015a, and particularly my lecture at Collège de France in 2015, cf. Gehrke 2015b) one may perceive some of the influences I am attempting to underline in this paper.
4. Quote from the abovementioned editions du Seuil, Vernant 2007, vol. II, p. 1957.
5. For a first glimpse, see Eder et al. (2015); a detailed article is in preparation.
6. Merleau-Ponty 1945.

ABSTRACTS

The paper’s starting point is the distinction of different traditions, which shape scholarship in the classics at an international level. In a very personal perspective, it gives important examples of the impact the “School of Paris” and French intellectual concepts in a broader sense had, and still have, on the author’s scholarly biography, particularly in his dealing with topics of anthropology, geography, religion, and the *imaginaire* in general.

Cet article prend pour point de départ la singularité des différentes traditions qui structurent encore la recherche sur les mondes antiques à l’échelle internationale. Selon une perspective personnelle, l’article met en évidence l’impact que fut celui de « L’École de Paris » et plus largement, des concepts de la pensée française, sur le parcours intellectuel de l’auteur, notamment dans son traitement de sujets relatifs à l’anthropologie, la religion ou l’imaginaire des mondes anciens.

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Mots-clés: Annales, universités dans les années 68, anthropologie, géographie, religion, Olympie

Keywords: Annales, universities in 1968, anthropology, geography, religion, Olympia

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